



AḤMAD 'ALAWĪ

AḤMAD B. ZAYN-AL-'ĀBEDĪN 'ALAWĪ 'ĀMELĪ, EŞFAHĀNĪ, SAYYED, philosopher and author in Persian and Arabic (d. between 1054/1644 and 1060/1650). He belonged to one of the great Shi'ite families of the region of Jabal 'Āmel in Syria, from whence many Shi'ite scholars emigrated to Iran at the time of the establishment of the Safavid dynasty. He was himself from Isfahan, and his works make him an illustrious member of its philosophical school. A first cousin and son-in-law of the great philosopher Mīr Dāmād, known as "*Mo'allem-e tālet*" (the "Third Master," after Aristotle and Fārābī), Sayyed Aḥmad was the intellectual master of several generations of philosophical students. He was Mīr Dāmād's student and disciple, but above all his spiritual child (*walad-e rūḥānī*), as he is affectionately designated in two *ejāzas* (permissions to teach).

As in the case of most of his fellow philosophers, biographical details are few, for the life of these men was in their work. But one can follow the course of Sayyed Aḥmad's life rather well because most of his books bear the date of their composition (Rawzātī [see bibliog.] counts twenty-four titles). We know, for example, that he entered vigorously into the polemic which was provoked by the book of one of his friends, Mīr Sayyed Lawḥī Mūsawī Sabzavārī (q.v.), concerning the cases of the famous Abū Moslem Ḳorāsānī and the mystic Ḥosayn Maṣṣūr Ḥallāj. Some fifteen scholars came to the defense of Sabzavārī; Sayyed Aḥmad defended him (in 1034/1624-25) in a Persian treatise entitled *Ezhār al-ḥaqq* ("Exposing the truth"). The *ejāzas* which were conferred on him by his two principal masters, Mīr Dāmād and the latter's friend Shaikh Bahā'-



al-dīn 'Āmelī (Shaikh Bahā'ī) are likewise valuable sources for his intellectual and spiritual biography. Those of Mīr Dāmād are dated 1017/1608 and 1019/1610; Shaikh Bahā'ī's is dated 1018/1609. These documents establish the fact that his education included the complete cycle of traditional studies, including *ḥekmat*, *kalām*, *feqh*, and *tafsīr*. His grandson, Mīr Moḥammad Ašraf, in one of his books entitled *Faẓā'el al-sādāt* ("The excellences of the sayyeds"), frequently mentions him and his numerous books with the greatest veneration. But Sayyed Aḥmad's devotion to the works of his master Mīr Dāmād may have helped to obscure his own works, much as Mīr Dāmād's works, for their part, were eclipsed by those of Mollā Ṣadrā Šīrāzī.

An early work of Sayyed Aḥmad was his glosses (*ta'liqāt*) on logic, dated 1005/1596. A number of his subsequent treatises fall into two distinct groups, the first of which is Shi'ite philosophy. The biographical catalogues list him, not with total accuracy, among the Peripatetic philosophers (*maššā'ūn*). It is characteristic of many of these philosophers that the boundary between Peripatetics and Platonists (*ešrāqīān*) is rather blurred, and is easily crossed in one direction or the other. If Sayyed Aḥmad can be called an Avicennan, he is nonetheless an *ešrāqī* Avicennan, one who is well acquainted with the work of Sohrawardī (*šayḵ-al-ešrāq*) and does not hesitate to cite him and even to agree with him. Among his philosophical works are the following: 1. A commentary on Mīr Dāmād's uncompleted *Taqwīm al-īmān* ("The rectification of the faith"); written in Arabic and dated 1023/1614, it is called *Kašf al-ḥaqā'eq fī šarḥ taqwīm al-īmān*. 2. An Arabic treatise known as *Rīāḥ al-qods* ("The spiritual Garden"), *al-Ta'liqāt al-qodsīya* ("Comments on metaphysics"), or *Mašābih al-qods wa qanādīl al-ons* ("The torches of the spiritual world and the lamps of intimacy"). Dated 1011/1602 and dedicated to Shah 'Abbās I (r. 996-1038/1588-1629), it is a super-commentary on the commentaries of Qūšjī and Ḳafarī on the metaphysics (*elāhīyāt*) of the *Tajrīd al-'aqā'id* of Ḳvājā Našīr-al-dīn Ṭūsī. Sayyed Aḥmad composed a summary of this work entitled: 3. *Ḥaẓīrat al-ons* ("The enclosed garden of intimacy"), dated 1037/1627. In it he mentions the following work: 4. *Rawḥat al-mottaqīn fī emāmat al-A'emat al-ma'šūmīn* ("The garden of the pious concerning the imamate of the immaculate Imams"), a commentary on the part of the *Tajrīd* in which Ṭūsī deals with the imamate and eschatology (*ma'ād*). 5. An essay entitled *al-Ma'āref al-elāhīya* ("The divine sciences"), a commentary on the celebrated Hadith: "He who knows his soul (or "knows himself"), knows his Lord." 6. A commentary on the metaphysics (*elāhīyāt*) of Avicenna's *Šefā'*; entitled *Meftāḥ al-Šefā' wa'l-'orwat al-wotqā* ("The key to the *Šefā'* and the firm tie"), a work that well



deserves to be published. This vast work is especially characteristic of the *ešrāqī*, Shi'ite Avicennism of the school of Isfahan. It is an original and personal summa in which Sayyed Aḥmad continues the dialogue with Avicenna begun by his master Mīr Dāmād in his *Qabasāt* ("The glowing fire-brands"). The title of Sayyed Aḥmad's work is explained in its first few lines by a reference to the oriental philosophy (*al-ḥekmat al-mašreqīya*) of Avicenna, which he quite properly considers to be the "key to the *Šefā'*." Only a few fragments of this "oriental philosophy" have survived, but its intentions are nonetheless perfectly clear, since Avicenna makes several significant references to it in his notes to the *Theology* of the so-called "Aristotle" (actually Plotinus). Even more significant is the support that Sayyed Aḥmad draws from the oriental theosophy (*al-ḥekmat al-ešrāqīya*) of Sohrevardī. In both of these cases, the term "orient" indicates the spiritual world. In the metaphysics of existence, Sayyed Aḥmad criticizes the grave consequences of the confusion which some Sufis had made between existence (*wojūd*, Latin *esse*) and the existent thing (*mawjūd*, Latin *ens*). When he comes to deal with the Avicennan schema of the procession (*šodūr*) of the Multiple, he refers at length to "the teaching which has been attributed to Zoroaster," although in fact he seems to be alluding to Zurvanism. But this evocation of the philosophy of ancient Iran is completely in line with the "oriental theosophy" of Sohrevardī. A final point of special interest is connected to the fact that the metaphysics of Avicenna's *Šefā'* concludes with an outline of a prophetic philosophy that opens the way to the prologue of the "Book of oriental theosophy" of Sohrevardī. Sayyed Aḥmad finds it easy to show here that the Imam, as the Perfect Man (*ensān-e kāmel*), combines all the necessary qualifications of both the sage and the prophet.

A second group of Sayyed Aḥmad's works also illustrates, but from another point of view, the *ešrāqī* aspect of his thought as a Shi'ite Avicennan. This group forms a tetralogy of works that appear to be unique of their kind. In them Sayyed Aḥmad shows himself to be a master of scriptural hermeneutics, i.e., the interpretation of the holy books which serve as the foundations and the sources of ruling principles for the Ahl al-Ketāb (People of the Book). Taking the holy book, a reality that is fundamental to the three Abrahamic communities of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, he attempts to restore it to its original and authentic purity by supporting himself on the Qur'ān, the divine revelation handed down to the Seal of the Prophets. In pursuit of this goal Sayyed Aḥmad demonstrates his extraordinary erudition. This philosopher-theologian of the school of Isfahan had a perfect knowledge of Hebrew; he frequently cites the Old Testament in Hebrew, transcribed in Arabic



characters, and then translates it word for word into Persian. Likewise, he had a thorough and deep knowledge of the four Gospels of the New Testament; his citations from them are also authentic, although one can not yet say which version he used. The four volumes of this tetralogy are all written in a very beautiful Persian, shining with the characteristics of a man of heart, as well as those of a writer.

The tetralogy comprises: 7. *Laṭā'ef-e ḡaybī* ("Subtle aspects of the metaphysical order"), which may be described as a set of prolegomena to all spiritual, or 'erfānī, hermeneutics of the Qur'ān. The theme of the Paraclete (*fāraqlīt*) is already utilized here. This work was begun in 1033/1623-24. 8. *Şawā'eq-e raḥmān* ("The thunderbolts of the merciful"), a confrontation with the Jewish religion and the Torah. 9. *Lawāme'-e rabbānī* ("The divine flashes"), a confrontation with Christianity and the Christian interpretation of the Old and New Testaments. In it the author refers to several of his other works. It is dated 1031/1621-22, and was meant to be completed by, and is referred to, in: 10. *Meşqal-e şafā' dar tajlīa va taşfīa-ye āyīna-ye ḥaqqnomā* ("The polisher of purity to burnish and make clear the mirror showing the truth"), undertaken following a dream vision of the Twelfth Imam, and finished in Moḥarram, 1032/November-December, 1622. Its long title is not without humor, since it replies to a work by a Christian missionary, who gave his apologia for the Christian religion the title *Āyīna-ye ḥaqqnomā* ("The mirror showing the truth"). Sayyed Aḥmad considers that the missionary's "mirror" was actually covered with dust, and that no one could see anything correctly in it; so he undertakes to clean and polish it. The controversy maintains a courteous tone, although this attitude does not exclude a firm seriousness and sometimes moving entreaties. The work is divided into three chapters, the first of which discusses the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity, which from the start is treated on the level of the metaphysics of existence. The second, more than half of the book, covers all aspects of Christology; the author is well aware of the vicissitudes of doctrine and of the transmission of texts in the first Christian centuries. The third chapter deals with the teachings of the Gospels and with eschatology (*ma'ād*). The conclusion recapitulates the earlier sections and finishes by providing a perspective on the doctrine of the Twelve Imams.

What makes *Meşqal-e şafā'* different from almost all other books of religious controversy in Islam is that the author has firsthand knowledge of the biblical texts. He divides the text of his Christian interlocutor into paragraphs, then replies to each with thought and care. He refers to many verses of the Old and



New Testaments. His argumentation is oriented towards the prophetology of the Paraclete; Sayyed Aḥmad shows the foundations of this doctrine by relating the verses in the Gospel of John (chaps. 14, 15, 16) which announce the coming of the Paraclete to Deuteronomy 18:15-18 (in which Moses announces the future prophet) and 33:2 (the three theophanies, which he connects with the prophetic missions of Moses, Jesus, and Moḥammad). This scriptural argument had already been taken up, in the 4th/10th century, by the philosopher Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Āmerī and to a certain extent by Bīrūnī. But here there is also something more: The “prophetic philosophy” of Shi'ism culminates in the revelation of the twofold manifestation of the Paraclete in the persons of the prophet Moḥammad and the Twelfth Imam.

The extreme interest of this book lies in the fact that the critique formulated by Sayyed Aḥmad, simply on the basis of his resources as a Shi'ite philosopher and believer, agrees with the critique which the very early Judeo-Christianity of the community in Jerusalem, grouped around “James the Just, the brother of the Lord,” directed against the teaching of St. Paul. This community, which lived on in Ebionism (whose traces can be followed in the Islamic lands down to the 10th century), professed a prophetology based on the idea of successive manifestations of the “True Prophet.” It is known that Islamic prophetology borrowed from this school, but only a Shi'ite work like that of Sayyed Aḥmad develops this theme fully. Research on the question of the “True Prophet” has been renewed by recent discoveries, especially that of the Dead Sea scrolls at Qumran. Studies of Islamic prophetology should also benefit from the renewed interest in this problem; from this standpoint the importance of Sayyed Aḥmad 'Alawī's works will become clear once they have been edited.

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